

## **FAQ's from Religion in the Schools Advisory Committee (formerly ROAC)**

### *1. Why distinguish between "teaching about religion" and "teaching religion"?*

Pittsford Schools value diversity and promote recognition, acceptance and respect for inclusive practices. The district believes an education is incomplete without knowledge of diverse religions, beliefs and practices. When these ideas are discussed objectively for the educational goal of helping students understand a variety of beliefs, and respect the right of all people, including those they disagree with and the emphasis is on the impact of these beliefs on history, literature, art, music, science, ethics and social institutions, teaching is "about" religion and very appropriate.

However, education about religion must be done in the context of the First Amendment. "Public school teachers" may be inserted in place of "Congress" in the First Amendment's Establishment clause when it states "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." When teaching to the public school population, PCSD staff act as agents of the state. As such PCSD staff members may not endorse specific religious practices or doctrines, nor may they coerce participation in religious activity. Schools must maintain official neutrality regarding sectarian religious issues and must neither advance nor inhibit religion.

### *2. Can holiday parties celebrate the cultural aspects of holidays if not the religious holy day?*

Holiday parties and their symbols are appropriate if they have an educational value as part of an instructional plan and do not lead to a feeling of exclusion for a segment of our school community. All students need to feel comfortable in, and as a part of, their schools. Some symbols that have come to be thought of as secular or cultural may still evoke strong feelings within the school community, especially during the period from November to December leading up to Christmas. Sensitivity to our community's diverse religious beliefs should be paramount in selection of symbols and rationale for parties within the school year.

### *3. Can students sing religious songs in concerts?*

The presentation of religious music primarily for its musical content, literary importance, historical value or vocal challenge is appropriate. Music with a religious text or with religious origins comprises a substantial portion of music literature. The presentation of music should not be made under circumstances which might reasonably suggest it is being offered primarily for devotional purposes or as a part of a religious celebration. The content of school special events, assemblies, concerts and programs must be primarily secular, objective and educational. They should not be focused on any one religion or religious observance or become a forum for religious devotion. Faculty

should be especially sensitive to the feelings of students who might wish to refrain from participating for religious reasons.

*4. Can students produce religious artwork or read religious texts/stories in the classroom?*

Yes, under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, students have the right to pray, discuss their religious views, read religious books/materials and submit homework or classroom work with religious content consistent with school standards of order and appropriateness. Students may express their religious beliefs in form of written or oral reports, homework and artwork. Teachers should assess these assignments and choices on academic standards for substance, relevance, appearance and grammar as they would any other work. Teachers and school administrators, acting in their official capacities as representatives of the state, may not encourage or solicit student religious or anti-religious activity, so must not interject personal views or advocate the work of certain students so as to be construed as promoting or inhibiting religion.

*5. May students pray in school or hold a Bible study meeting on school grounds?*

Student participation in before or after school events, such as “see you at the flag pole” or other prayer gatherings, is permissible. This includes engaging in voluntary personal or group prayer or scripture reading in the cafeteria, around flag poles, in hallways, at athletic or other extracurricular activities, so long as it is student driven, not disruptive and does not compel other students to participate unwillingly. School officials, acting in their official capacity, may neither encourage nor discourage participation in such events. If a district allows non-religious groups to advertise or announce meetings using school newspapers, the public address system or leaflets, it must grant religious groups and gatherings the same privileges.

*6. How can we allow Valentine’s Day and Halloween activities or parties?*

Activities associated with such holidays as Halloween and Valentine’s Day, though both are rooted in pagan or religious history, are commonly celebrated as non-secular cultural events in the U.S. It is felt that most children experience school activities at these times of the year as fun and educational. While there is no intent to promote any specific religion or form of worship in these school activities, it may still be felt by some families as having religious overtones in conflict with their beliefs. Staff members are asked to be sensitive to these concerns and to offer opportunities for students to be excused or to be offered alternatives that lend inclusion in the fun of the learning experiences at these times of the year.

*7. Can students distribute religious materials and if not, what should we do as teachers if we see such activity going on?*

Students have the right to distribute religious literature to their schoolmates in the same manner as other non-school literature being handed out by students on school grounds. A school may confine distribution of all literatures to a particular time, place and amount to avoid disruption to the school's activities. If teachers see outsiders gaining access to the classroom to distribute religious or anti-religious literature, they should intercede and escort the person(s) and materials off school premises.

*8. Can items made by students be used to decorate the school if those items are of a religious nature or symbolism?*

Schools often emphasize the universal values of peace, goodwill, philanthropy, kindness, unselfishness and giving that are shared by all, whether they be of a particular religion or of no religious faith. Symbols, as part of an instructional program, that promote an understanding of the importance of religions in literature, the social sciences, the arts and culture may be displayed in the educational setting. Decorating with the intent of celebrating a religious or holiday period of time, even when the decorations are made by students, excludes segments of our community and would not be appropriate.

*9. How should a teacher respond to questions from students about their own faith and beliefs on a religious subject?*

If a student asks a district employee about that employee's personal religious beliefs, the employee may be uncomfortable and choose not to respond out of respect for the student's freedom of conscience as well as their own. However, while acting in an official capacity, an employee who responds must do so in an appropriate manner. When responding to a student's spontaneous question about personal religious beliefs or views, the employee must maintain official neutrality and be careful not to advocate or encourage acceptance of his/her religious perspective, especially given his/her influence over students in his/her position of authority.

*10. May a teacher wear holiday or religious symbols on their person?*

Teachers, staff and students are permitted to wear on their persons decorations such as necklaces bearing crosses or Stars of David or badges that carry religious messages just as they may wear religious attire such as kippot, head scarves and clothing items show religious expressions. Regulation of staff attire, apparel or style must be least restrictive to provide respect for individual rights of expression.

However, employees of the district must be neutral about religion when acting in their official capacities. An employee's rights relating to voluntary religious practices and freedom of speech do not include proselytizing to any student regarding atheistic, agnostic, sectarian, religious or denominational doctrine while the employee is acting in

an official capacity, nor may an employee attempt to use his or her position to influence a student regarding the student's religious beliefs or lack thereof.

*11. How should missed work, late homework or missed test(s) be made up by a student when the teacher is told that the absence was due to a religious observance? What if the teacher wasn't alerted to this absence before-hand?*

The school calendar and Parent/Student handbooks remind families that it is their responsibility to alert teachers to upcoming absences that are due to religious observance. As staff members are not allowed to poll their classrooms to anticipate the impact of absences around holy days/periods, it is helpful when students and families are proactive in sharing this information.

When conflicts between holidays and schoolwork occur, flexibility must be exercised. Care should be taken to avoid special projects, introduction of major new programs or other activities difficult to make up at some times of the school year (as noted in the back of the school calendar or as reminders from building principals occur). Whether the teacher is alerted before-hand or finds out later, sensitivity should be key in dealing with the student in scheduling make-up work, tests or homework due dates. Students are expected to make up missed assignments within a reasonable period of time without penalty. While ensuring that absences for religious observances are accommodated, students who remain in school must also continue to have meaningful learning experiences all school year-long.

*12. If a concern or problem arises that relates to religion in our schools, how does one get information or clarification on how it should be resolved?*

Student, parent or Pittsford employee concerns should be brought to the classroom teacher, the building principal, assistant principal or counselor where the student is enrolled or to the employee's immediate supervisor. Parents should be aware that for religious observances or questions about the district policy, they may also access the PTSA Religion in the Schools Advisory Committee member to seek a listening ear and clarification. If a concern cannot be resolved or question answered at the building or supervisor level, a clarification can be directed to the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. Upon receipt of a concern, the Assistant Superintendent or a designee shall investigate the problem, consult with the Religion in the Schools Advisory Committee and shall provide a response to the issue regarding findings and conclusions.